

Thomas Pink – Reason and Agency

Purpose of Pink's paper

- To compare & contrast the Hobbes-Davidson and Aquinas approaches to the explanation of human agency. This comes down to deciding both what an action is (what count as actions) and also how we should best explain why we perform actions, whatever they are.
- To demonstrate that the Hobbes-Davidson motivation-based theories of agency are deficient, missing off half of what we normally understand by human agency (ie. second-order agency)
- To elaborate the Aquinas-Pink model of agency
- To describe how the Hobbes-Davidson approach came about
- To suggest that the reasons that gave rise to this approach no longer apply
- To suggest a return to, or at least the non-dismissal of, the Aquinas model which is a practical reason-based theory of human agency and allows that rational decision making can be (second-order) agency.

The two approaches to Human Agency

- **Hobbes-Davidson - Motivation-based theories of agency** : actions are explained by psychological motivations. We do something intentionally if we do it for a reason or have some purpose in mind – if we have a pro attitude to a class of actions of a certain type that, directs us towards some end, and a belief that the action in question belongs to this class and is likely to bring this end about.
- **Aquinas - Practical reason-based theories of human agency** : Aquinas restricted the application of motivation-based theories of agency to non-rational animals. In contrast, adult humans possess a capacity for practical rationality – ie. to reason and form judgements about which actions they would be justified¹ in performing.
- **The difference** : According to Pink and Aquinas, and in stark contrast to the Hobbes-Davidson view, our decisions to act are cases of agency. Aquinas held a dual-order theory of agency. According to Hobbes-Davidson, actions are restricted to doings or refrainings from doings (first-order agency). However, according to Pink-Aquinas, our prior deciding to do or refrain from doing are also actions (second-order agency). According to this view, it is up to us, and within our control, which actions we decide or will² to do (just as it is within us actually to do them or not).
- **Summary of scholastic versus early modern view** : the scholastics considered that human agency is the exercise of practical rationality – that there is a second-order agency consisting in the operation of a rational appetite by which we can use practical reason to motivate ourselves. The early moderns denied the operation of second-order agency and restricted agency to the first-order action under purposive motivation.

¹ Does he mean morally or rationally justified ?

² Pink briefly describes in a footnote his *voluntarist* theory of the mental, in which the will is separated from the intellect. The will is the executive function the puts into effect as either decisions or intentions the practical judgements that arise from the deliberations of the intellect, but does not itself deliberate.

- **Common sense** : Aquinas' view accommodates an important view of agency as commonly conceived – that it's up to me whether I decide to do A or B, just as it's up to me, when the time comes, whether I actually do A or B. Pink draws on the unlikely support of Daniel Dennett at this point, since Dennett agrees that this is part of what free will seems to us to be. Deciding to act isn't something I can do inadvertently. But more than this, decisions to act are deliberate doings that determine our deliberate doings and exercise our capacity for self-determination.

Development of the Pink-Aquinas Position : Critical points of the argument³

- **Means-end justifiability** : Pink asks what it is for a mode of justification to be practical. To address this question, he asks further how we would persuade someone to perform some action. Pink suggests by persuading them that the action would cause (or, better, constitute) a desirable outcome. So, practical reason is directed towards the ends at which the agency might aim. On this analysis, agency is means-end justifiable. Performing a particular action counts as agency only in case the rationality of that action depends on the ends of⁴ the action being desirable.
- **Control** : Agency relates to the exercise of control. Means-end justifiability just is reason governing the exercise of control.
- **Desires** : The common intuition is that desires are passive and are not formed by deliberate acts. However, we've made no appeal to the non-purposiveness of desires. What makes desiring to do A rational is the desire-worthiness of doing A, which is itself justified by the desirable ends that doing A might further. So, desire isn't means-end justifiable - justified as directly furthering the desirable ends - but is one step back from this.
- **Decisions** : When does deciding or intending⁵ count as agency ? Only when the intention is formed in a non-desire-like way, as an action where the rationality of the intention depends on the likelihood of that intention itself furthering desirable ends, and not just of the object of the intention (the act intended) doing so. Deciding or intending counts as agency only if making the decision or intention is itself means-end justifiable.
- **Decisions as action co-ordinators** : Decisions co-ordinate over time the performance of our actions and facilitate reason's government of first-order agency. Decision in advance lets us know what actions we will perform in the future, allows the co-ordination of present and future actions and ensures the diachronic justification of actions. Pink argues that the action co-ordination function of decisions is what makes them means-end justifiable; and this applies not just to "A or not-A" but to "A or B". This ties in with our ordinary conception of second-order agency – of deciding what to do, not just whether to do it. This is only true if the decision itself, and not just the act decided on, is means-end justifiable and

³ What position ? Which argument ? To what end ? In particular, purposiveness features extensively in relation to agency, and there seems to be some confusing ambivalence as to whether second-order alleged agency needs to be, or is, purposive.

⁴ or furthered by

⁵ There is a qualitative distinction between decisions and intentions. Intentions, unlike decisions, don't try to "fix" anything. Pink seems to agree with Davidson over this distinction earlier in the paper.

explained in terms of ends (the end explained by Pink being the action co-ordination function of decisions).

- **Decisions as Motivators** : Decisions to act only fulfil their function of co-ordinating our actions over time if they ensure a persistent motivation up to the time of action to act in accord with the decision⁶. If we're likely to change our mind when it comes to actual performance, it may not be rational to decide to perform the action in the first place. Action-coordinatory justifications for taking particular decisions depend on that decision being motivatory – ie. as making us more likely to perform the action itself. This is what makes decisions (rather than only actions) means-end justifiable.
- **Other functions of decisions** : Pink alleges that decisions can be means-end justifiable even when they are not purposive⁷. Intending to do X and doing X can have different justifications, related to the potentially different ends furthered by intending to do X and actually doing X. Not surprisingly, having an action co-ordinatory justification depends on the decision being a good action co-ordinator – ie. leaving one with a lasting motivation to perform the action. The ends likely to be furthered by deciding to do A and actually doing or attempting A are likely to differ if the connection between the intention and the action is weak. Our decision to decide to do A isn't then settled by whether it would be good to do or attempt A in the future.
- **Explanation of decision / action convergence** : However, ordinary decisions do have a good connection between decision and action, leading to convergence of the ends likely to be furthered by the decision and by the future action. Questions of decisions and actions need not then be separated. So, practical deliberation is usually about the actions rather than the decision. By default, we ignore the ends furthered by the decision. Motivations for deciding to do A are therefore about ends likely to be furthered by doing A, not those likely to be furthered by deciding to do A. Consequently, our first order, but not usually our second order, actions are purposive. In Aquinas' terminology – our first order actions are commanded by reason, our second order actions only elicited⁸.
- **Decision-making and the will** : Aquinas felt that voluntary agency in general was means-end justifiable. He believed that our decisions or willings, as well as our actions, could be rationally deliberated about as means to ends, and so be commanded. Reason can judge that it would be good to will something and command that act of will. This is consistent with actions of the will being non-purposive. What was essential was its practical, rather than purposive, mode of justification. To act is to exercise rationality governed by reason in action-governing form⁹.

⁶ Pink seems to treat decisions as private oaths in which we bind ourselves to perform the act decided on.

⁷ I couldn't follow this argument – and there didn't seem to be an example to make the case clear.

⁸ So, is Pink saying that second-order agency is an unusual special case ?

⁹ I'm not sure what's going on in this rather circular locution. I thought Pink had argued that decisions (= acts of the will ?) could be purposive if made to increase the probability of an action being performed.

The provenance of motivation-based accounts of human agency

Pink rehearses yet again the two alternative accounts of human agency. Firstly, Aquinas' theory of human agency based on practical rationality with means-end justification of both decision and action. This was subsequently challenged by the Hobbesean tradition viewing agency as purposive motivation, with decision not usually being purposive. This led to doubt that there is agency or freedom of the human will.

Pink's alleged reasons for the Hobbesean move :-

- 1. Scepticism about human practical rationality :** Belief in second-order agency depends on human rationality. In the western Christian tradition, this rationality is in tension with the doctrines of the fall and original sin. Anti-Pelagianism views the fall as damaging to practical rationality. Calvin thinks that for freedom of the will, man needs (1) to discern the good by right reason, then (2) to choose the good, then (3) to follow it. The Fall has drastically restricted his ability in all three of these areas¹⁰.
- 2. The reconceptualisation of rational agency¹¹ :** Aquinas' account of human agency left a rift between the psychology of rational humans and that of non-rational animals. On Aquinas' view, the psychological attitudes key to human agency – the will and the intellect – are entirely absent in animals. Secondly, he espoused reason-dualism, where the non-rational passions and sensory capacities of both humans and animals were material, though the distinctively rational intellectual faculties of human agency were immaterial. Hobbes accepted that humans could undertake practical reasoning while animals could not, but held a materialist account of human nature central to his metaphysical and political project, in which human psychology was continuous with, if more developed than, animal psychology. Human agents do not have immaterial psychological attitudes lacked by animals but only more complex and various action-explanatory psychological attitudes of the same kind. Hobbes applied what had been an exclusively animal theory of agency to humans. Both human and animal agency is explained as a product of the (Hobbesean) will – in which purposive motion is explained by the deliberative interaction of desires for ends and beliefs about how such ends might be achieved. Distinctively human practical reasoning arises through language rather than immaterial psychological faculties. While the psychological states of beliefs and attitudes are language-independent, in humans they can be recorded and expressed in language. According to Hobbes, language and concomitant reason is an invented tool enabled by our greater intelligence which enables us to reach general conclusions from particular cases. There are no greater differences between reasoning and non-reasoning beings that between humans who can and cannot write. While not sceptical about human reason (as,

¹⁰ Pink has, in my view, distorted Calvin's Pauline position which is aimed mainly at the moral capacities of the "natural man" and the negative response of the natural intellect to the "foolishness" of the gospel. The focus on the moral degeneracy is intended to highlight the need for salvation in Christ, which provides a remedy; ultimately realised in heaven or where-ever the believer is resurrected to, but partly so on earth.

¹¹ This is a strange section-heading : it's about the alleged lack of discontinuity between humans and animals, with the focus on what's common.

allegedly, was Calvin) Hobbes did not appeal to reason in accounting for human agency, which is just a special case of animal agency.

- 3. Scepticism about practical reason itself :** Hume thought that human agency is not governed by reason at all. For Hume, the will is merely an internal impression we're conscious of when we make a bodily movement or perceive something¹². Hobbes denied that belief in an agency of the will was common sense and argued rather that it was a scholastic invention. Pink, however, thinks that belief in an agency of the will must be part of common-sense psychology for such as Dennett to recognise it as common-sense.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Pink claims that the practical reason-based model of human agency is central to the history of the subject and explains our ordinary conception of agency. If Hume is right and agency isn't governed by reason at all, it will fail to be an adequate account, but Pink doesn't discuss the matter here. What Pink doesn't like is that the motivation-based theory is just assumed unreflectively and the practical reason-based model neglected. Pink is particularly disappointed in Davidson, who does not share the (alleged) intellectual preconceptions that gave rise to the motivation-based theory, which Pink summarises as:-

- A radically anti-Pelagian theological anthropology
- A desire for a language- and reason-independent continuity between humans and animal psychological attitudes and faculties
- Outright reason-scepticism

¹² Pink gives something like “a phenomenological marker for subsequent action, rather than a locus of rational appetite and second order agency”, but I'm not clear what this means.